

Opening Statement of Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Chair, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia
Hearing Entitled “9/11 Recommendations Implementation Act Oversight,
Part I -- Oppressors vs. Reformers in the Middle East and Central Asia.”
May 4, 2005

In his 2005 Inaugural address, President Bush stated that: “The policy of the United States is to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.... When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.”

It is in our own vital interest to support democratic rule. Ballots must substitute for bullets as the means of expressing frustrations and voicing demands.

Since the brutal terrorist of September 11th, the United States has responded to this challenge with policies that offer a pragmatic approach to the challenges that face the region today.

The United States reflected upon the “freedom deficit” and other deficiencies with respect to education, women’s participation, and economic development, identified in the Arab Human Development Report. We sought to develop partnership’s with the reformers in the region in both the public and private sector and encompassing civil society.

This evolved into the Middle East Partnership Initiative, the Broader Middle East Initiative, and endeavors aimed at expanding bilateral trade relations toward the creation of a U.S.-Middle East Free Trade Area.

Title VII of the 9/11 Recommendations Implementation Act further focused on the need to expand our efforts in support of freedom, democracy, and economic growth in the region as a means of addressing the root causes of Islamist extremism and terrorism in the region.

I would ask our witnesses to address the status of implementation of these provisions and how we are engaging “the struggle of ideas” in the Arab and Muslim world.

What has been the success rate of our programs? What benchmarks have we developed to measure success? What are the future priorities for the Middle East Partnership Initiative, the Broader Middle East Initiative, and how have these priorities translated into programmatic and budgeting requests?

We also would like you to address initiatives being pursued through the Human Rights and Democracy Fund and other democracy and human rights promotion efforts.

The Middle East Working Group at the Community of Democracies focused on the need to strengthen and integrate civil society into the democratization process; on combating corruption; providing for an independent judiciary; and equality under the law.

The participants referred to the need to educate the populations about human rights and democracy, in order for acculturation to take place that would help expedite the process of political and economic liberalization.

They committed to such initiatives as the Center for Democratic Transition in Hungary and expressed support for the concept of developing election standards and assessment mechanisms for the Community of Democracies.

Most importantly, Yemen proposed, and participant countries such as Bahrain and Jordan expressed support for, an Inter-Arab Democratic Charter, similar to the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

What steps does the Department envision to follow-up on these commitments and proposals? How will the Community of Democracies process be integrated into our strategy toward the Arab and Muslim world? In turn, how will our programs be modified to build upon the commitments at the CD?

Conversely, we look forward to hearing from you on the U.S. approach to those governments that fail to heed the calls for reform from their own people and repeatedly fail to meet the conditions for receiving bilateral assistance from the U.S.

Assisting the peoples of the Middle East in their efforts to create a democratic political and social order will not be easy, but it is possible. There are increasing signs that the wave of democracy is engulfing the Arab and Muslim world.

This past January, the Iraqi people demonstrated to the terrorists and the world, the power of the human spirit. They risked their lives to exercise their inalienable rights as human beings and citizens by participating in the first free election in Iraq. In October of last year, the Afghan people, once oppressed by the Taliban's terrorist regime, cast their ballots in their country's first-ever free elections. There are vivid examples in Kyrgyzstan.

Some leaders in the region have already heeded these calls and have taken tangible steps toward political, social, and economic reform, particularly King Abdullah in Jordan and fellow reformist leaders in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Morocco.

In February of this year, Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak announced a proposal to amend his country's constitution to allow competitive presidential elections.

If carried out, it would be the first multiparty presidential vote in the most populous Arab country, and a major victory for President Bush's vision of Egypt "which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East, can now show the way toward democracy in the Middle East."

However, much remains to be done.

The near total lack of the most fundamental political, civil and human rights in Saudi Arabia has troubled many of us for years, as has the lack of religious freedom for visitors, for Saudi citizens who follow non-official strands of Islam, or for adherents of other faiths.

In Iran we are confronted with a regime that represents a clear threat to U.S. efforts to advance democracy and economic liberalization throughout the region.

Similarly, in Syria, we face a regime that continues to deny both the Lebanese and Syrian people the most fundamental freedoms.

With respect to Syria's pernicious impact on Lebanese politics, I am compelled to highlight the request by Lebanon's Head of Delegation at the Community of Democracies meeting. He said: "We would receive with great pleasure international observers to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections."

However, the concerns go beyond election day. They extend to the election law and the possible isolation of certain sectors of Lebanese society. We have also been receiving disturbing reports about Syrian intelligence activities to manipulate the upcoming elections in Lebanon, such as the widespread naturalization of Syrian agents as Lebanese to swell the pro-Syrian electorate.

The U.S. must maintain the pressure and work with the international community to ensure that the Lebanese people are able to exercise their rights and make their vote count.

In keeping with the U.S. commitment to support reformers and pro-democracy advocates in the Arab and Muslim countries, I am working on legislation entitled "Fomenting Reform in Education, the Economy, and Democracy Over the Middle East—the FREEDOM Act."

I look forward to receiving recommendations from our witnesses on how to achieve this overarching goal with respect to this critical region.

As former President Ronald Reagan said: "we cannot stop at the foothills when Everest lies ahead." We can conquer Everest only by helping to create an environment where freedom and prosperity can flourish. Only then will the United States be able to guarantee the success of our efforts in the war against terror and oppression.